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The Importance of Job Fit

MSPB looks beyond traditional concepts of job fit to help improve employee engagement and agency outcomes.

The Merit Systems Protection Board's (MSPB) 2008 report *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement* was the first to show a relationship between higher levels of Federal employee engagement and improved agency outcomes. Specifically, in agencies where employees were more engaged, agencies produced better program results, employees used less sick leave, fewer employees filed equal employment opportunity complaints, and there were fewer cases of workplace injury or illness. That report recommended many ways that agencies could improve the engagement level of their workforces. One of those ways was to ensure a good person-to-job-fit. MSPB recently released a research brief that, using 2016 Federal employee survey results, takes a closer look at exactly what job fit is, why it is important, and how agency leaders might improve job fit within their organizations.

Research shows, and our survey results confirm, that there are three distinct components that describe the compatibility between a person and the work they do:

- The fit between the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the individual with the demands of the job (demand-abilities job fit);
- The degree to which the job fulfills an individual's daily material and psychological needs (needs-supplies job fit); and
- The degree to which the job aligns with a person's beliefs about who they are or who they want to be (self-concept job fit).

Matching prospective employee skills to those required by the job is relatively straightforward and is what most of the hiring process is based on. It is also what most people traditionally focus on when thinking about job fit. More difficult may be the constant reevaluation that is needed to ensure that employee skills improve, adapt, and even transform as organizational missions evolve and as the ever-increasing pace of change alters program operations and processes.

Determining whether individuals possess the ability to perform the job seems easier than matching employee emotional needs to those supplied by the job or to matching a job to an employee's self-concept, both of which appear to be somewhat more elusive. It should not be surprising, then, that more Federal employees (68 percent) have high fit between the skills they possess and those required by the job than have fit in the other two job fit components. Survey results show that more Federal employees (61 percent) possess high self-concept job fit than possess needs-supplies job fit (55 percent).

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Our Mission

The MSPB Office of Policy and Evaluation conducts studies to assess the health of Federal merit systems and to ensure they are free from prohibited personnel practices.

Issues of Merit

We offer insights and analyses on topics related to Federal human capital management, particularly findings and recommendations from our independent research.

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Though self-concept fit seems harder to attain than demand-abilities fit, the Federal Government should have some leverage in this area. Previous survey results have shown that vast majorities of Federal employees believe the work they do is important, personally identify with the mission of their agencies, and are highly motivated to serve the public. These factors likely contribute to better self-concept job fit.

Improving needs-supplies fit is an area on which organizations should focus as the fewest survey respondents (55 percent) displayed high fit in this component. As most Federal supervisors or employees have little control over pay and benefits decisions, our needs-supplies measure focuses mostly on the psychological needs of employees. Designing jobs or job tasks, or providing more autonomy to help hold the interest of employees could pay dividends for organizations. Employees should do their due diligence when changing jobs to ensure that the opportunities they consider include work they can feel passionate about. Employees should also be active participants in the performance management process by voicing ideas to their superiors regarding how their current jobs can be made more interesting or fulfilling. Agency leadership and first-level supervisors should foster organizational cultures where employees feel comfortable playing an active role in the performance management process.

We found that the three components of job fit had a generally additive positive effect on several different employee characteristics we examined—indicating that the more types of job fit employees possess, the better for Federal organizations. Common characteristics among individuals with high job fit were:

- High job satisfaction;
- Increased levels of employee engagement;
- Better job performance, as gauged by self-reported appraisal ratings; and
- Less intention to leave the organization.

Like any survey results, ours reflect employee attitudes at a specific point in time. This certainly does not mean that how employees relate to the work they do is a static construct. Jobs change over time. Work processes can be tweaked or transformed. Staff and supervisors come and go. Employees themselves grow and change. What remains constant is that people interact with their work in at least three important ways. As employees constantly reevaluate how, and even if, they fit with the work they are doing, so too must organizational leaders reevaluate how work is designed; how employees are hired, trained, and developed; and how employee performance is managed to maximize fit between the work to be done and those doing the work. ❖

New Release!

MSPB recently published our revised guide to the merit system principles (MSPs). *The Merit System Principles: Keys to Managing the Federal Workforce* is a user-friendly guide that highlights the history of the Federal civil service, provides a set of questions and answers about the MSPs, gives an overview of each MSP, and presents links to references for additional information.

The intended audience for the guide is new Federal supervisors and leaders, but the guide is a great tool to help everyone increase their knowledge about what the MSPs are, why they are important, and the actions we can each take to support a merit-based culture.

Competing Visions of the Direct-Hire Authority Covered Under 5 U.S.C § 3304

There is widespread agreement these days that Federal hiring is in need of repair. The criticisms abound: the process takes too long, is too complex, and often fails to produce quality candidates. The criticisms persist despite numerous efforts to reform hiring. Part of the problem is the “iron triangle” common to business processes; that is, there are inherent tensions among speed, cost, and quality. And in merit-based hiring, quality—which includes treating applicants fairly and identifying the best applicants—should not be treated as optional.

To address inefficiencies in Federal hiring, the Government has created a number of alternatives to the competitive hiring process. One of these is the direct-hire authority covered under 5 U.S.C. § 3304(a)(3) (herein referred to as §3304 DHA). This authority was established by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and streamlines competitive service hiring procedures for positions in which critical hiring needs or severe shortages of candidates exist. In MSPB’s research brief *Direct-Hire Authority Under 5 U.S.C. § 3304: Usage and Outcomes*, we look at how §3304 DHA is being used and some of the results.

The good news is that there are many positive results. First, although usage of §3304 DHA has grown steadily since it was established in 2002, it accounts for a relatively small proportion of all competitive service appointments. The §3304 DHA has been used largely to fill positions where there is a critical hiring need or shortage of candidates, including medical, information technology, and acquisition occupations. So it appears that the authority is being used selectively, to supplement competitive hiring rather than replace it. Second, the demographics of §3304 DHA hires compare favorably with those hired through “regular” competitive service procedures in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. Finally, Federal human resources (HR) representatives reported benefits such as improved applicant quality, improved timeliness, and increased satisfaction among hiring officials and new hires.

The not-so-good news is that we may not all be on the same page about the role §3304 DHA plays in Federal hiring. As discussed in the brief, guidance from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) indicates that while agencies should ensure applicants meet the qualification requirements, they should not assess for applicants’ level of qualifications. Rather, “agencies should assess applicants in the order in which the applications were received, and select any qualified applicant in an order that approximates order of receipt.” OPM officials stated that this guidance maintains objectivity in selection and reflects the statutory requirements that §3304 DHA be used only for critical hiring needs or a severe shortage of candidates, thus making hiring quickly extremely important.

On the other hand, agency responses to our inquiries seem to indicate that reaching high-quality candidates is an important goal when using §3304 DHA. Many agencies reported expanding recruitment efforts, implementing additional assessments, and doing more to draw distinctions among applicants. This suggests that agency satisfaction with §3304 DHA derives from, at least in part, a perceived ability to hire better-qualified candidates—not just the ability to hire qualified applicants quickly. So it appears that OPM and agencies may have different views of how to use §3304 DHA and its place among hiring flexibilities.

These differing views raise the question of whether direct-hire flexibilities should only be used for reasons of speed or scarcity or whether quality should also be a factor. This is a critical question facing Government policymakers. The research brief documents rapid growth in the number and use of direct-hire authorities not covered under §3304. This growth appears to demonstrate an underlying frustration with current competitive hiring procedures. If the growth and frustration continue, these other DHAs could become the primary means of hiring in some occupations or organizations. This reinforces the continued relevance of a 2006 MSPB recommendation that OPM, in consultation with Congress and stakeholders, develop a policy framework for hiring reform. That framework could address what outcomes can reasonably be expected from DHAs and how DHAs can best be used in conjunction with competitive hiring procedures. ❖

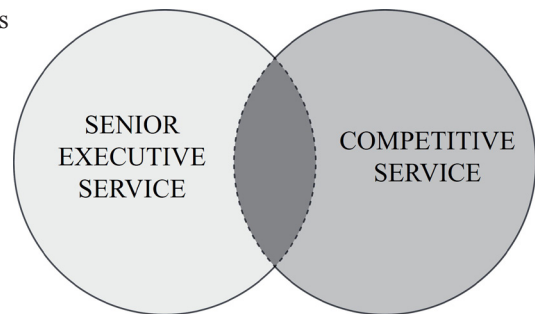


Acting Director, Policy and Evaluation

The Senior Executive Service: An Exercise in Change and Continuity

A brief look at some similarities and distinctions between the SES and the competitive service.

As part of the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978, Congress established the Senior Executive Service (SES) as a separate personnel system. In this article, we outline how the creators of the SES sought to preserve core values while seeking to create a Governmentwide leadership corps. The intent is not to evaluate or endorse particular policies, but to illustrate how previous policymakers distinguished principles and practices and balanced continuity with change.



Practices that Preserve Fundamental Values

The framers of the CSRA codified governing values—the merit system principles (MSPs)—for the entire Federal service. In some instances, the shared principles are implemented through shared practices, such as the following.

- *An oath of office.* The fourth MSP states that “all employees should maintain high standards of integrity, conduct, and concern for the public interest.” In support of that principle, all Federal employees—both career and noncareer, from entry level to executive level—take an oath of office to “support and defend the Constitution” and to “well and faithfully discharge the duties” of the position. (See 5 U.S.C. §3331).
- *Selection based on merit.* Consistent with the first MSP that requires selection on the basis of relative ability, both competitive service and SES appointees must meet basic qualifications and go through an assessment process intended to separate the highly qualified from the merely qualified. For the SES, that process uses a Governmentwide standard (the Executive Core Qualifications, or ECQs) and the appointment must be approved by OPM.
- *Freedom from arbitrary action and political coercion.* The eighth MSP states that employees are to be “protected against arbitrary action, personal favoritism, or coercion for partisan political purposes.” Civil service law further provides that the SES is to be “guided by the public interest and free from improper political interference.”

Practices that Draw Distinctions

Although the competitive service and the SES share fundamental values, the CSRA also viewed the two services as distinct in scope of responsibility and core competencies. That vision was reflected in the following distinguishing practices.

- *Governmentwide qualifications.* In the competitive service, qualification requirements are based primarily on a position’s occupation and duties. In contrast, there is a single set of ECQs—leading change, leading people, results driven, business acumen, and building coalitions—for all positions in the SES. Also, to ensure objectivity and promote the selection of executives who could be effective in diverse settings, the Qualification Review Boards that evaluate candidates for the SES must be composed of individuals from different Federal agencies.
- *Mobility.* Because missions and organizations are dynamic, the framers of the CSRA thought that senior executives should be too—changing roles, agencies, and locations as needed. Accordingly, the CSRA stipulates that the agency head has the right “to reassign senior executives to best accomplish the agency’s mission.” Although civil service law also authorizes agencies to reassign competitive service employees, it contains no expectation of mobility.
- *Pay and awards.* In recognition of the scope an executive has to affect organizational performance and results, awards are integral to the SES pay system. The SES system provides for public recognition for the most outstanding

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executives (the Presidential Rank Awards) and requires agencies to establish and fund an awards program (*see* 5 U.S.C. §5384). Under non-SES pay systems, awards are authorized for high performance, but are not required.

The CSRA is now over 40 years old. Since then, much has changed in American society and the world of work. It is unlikely that the framers of CSRA would make all the same assumptions or choices if they were drafting a “Civil Service Reform Act of 2021.” Still, their approach to creating the SES—setting core values, distinguishing nonnegotiable principles from changeable practices, and aligning practices with a broad vision—remains relevant today. ❖

Disability Retirement

In certain circumstances, agencies have an obligation to help employees file for retirement.

Employees can have performance, attendance, or conduct issues for a variety of reasons, including medical conditions or what the agency might suspect are medical conditions. Sometimes a reasonable accommodation can enable an employee to fully meet the conduct and performance standards expected of employees, as discussed in our Fall 2014 *Issues of Merit*. But what happens if the employee cannot be accommodated?



If the employee is unable to meet conduct or performance standards, a removal action may be necessary. However, that might not be the end of the agency’s obligations. As OPM’s regulations explain, an agency must file an application for disability retirement on the employee’s behalf if *all* of the following conditions are met:

- The employee has 18 months of creditable service under the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) or 5 years under the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS);
- The agency has issued a decision to remove the employee;
- The agency has reviewed medical documentation that it believes shows a disease or injury is responsible for the unacceptable performance, attendance, or conduct;
- The employee is incapable of filing on his or her own behalf;
- The employee has no personal representative or guardian; and
- The employee has no immediate family member who is willing to file an application on his or her behalf.

What happens if not all of these criteria are met? If the agency believes a medical condition is the apparent cause for the removal becoming necessary, the agency must still advise the employee in writing of his or her possible eligibility for disability retirement and of the time limit for filing an application.

If the only unmet condition is the medical documentation, then another obligation applies as well. OPM’s CSRS/FERS Handbook instructs that the agency should place a statement in the official personnel file that describes what efforts the agency made to obtain that documentation and why the agency believed that the disability application would have been appropriate. This statement is important, because the employee or someone acting on their behalf can still file within the year following the separation (or later if limited conditions are met) and supply the medical documentation then.

The decision to remove an employee can be difficult, especially if it seems the employee bears no fault and a disease or injury is responsible. Therefore, it is important for agency officials to understand that not only can they still help the employee, it might very well be their obligation. For more information, see 5 CFR § 844.202 for FERS regulations and 5 CFR § 831.1205 for CSRS. ❖

Choosing an Online Learning Program

What kinds of questions should you ask?

It is well recognized that enhancing one's credentials through training and education can pay large dividends in terms of salary, responsibility, advancement, and marketability. Now, many employees may be looking to online education as a career-builder, driven by the need to “socially distance” and the savings in commute time due to more remote work. However, not all programs are created equal, so we chatted with Dr. Karlease Kelly—former Provost of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Virtual University—to obtain her perspective about continuing education. When in operation, USDA’s Virtual University was a global training entity focused on preparing department employees and student interns for professional excellence and career advancement. Dr. Kelly believes that education and training not only give employees a competitive edge when applying for jobs but also help improve their decision-making abilities and quality of thinking.



These advantages, combined with additional time at home, has many employees choosing to avail themselves of an explosion of online education/training opportunities. However, these programs vary widely in their quality, duration, and cost, and choosing the right one for you may be difficult. Based on our review of the literature and advice from Dr. Kelly, we present the following eight questions to ask yourself when considering whether or not to pursue a new educational opportunity:

1. **Am I genuinely interested in the topic, and can I maintain my interest and motivation (time and energy) to complete and perform well in the program?** If your motives are not strong or are based on passing fads or financial considerations alone, then sustaining the effort may be difficult over the long haul.
2. **Do I anticipate life or work events that will distract me from completing the program?** Often, online programs have strict deadlines for assignments. If your work or personal life may unexpectedly take you away from the course, find out how, or even if, this can be accommodated.
3. **Do I have the foundational knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform well in the program?** The promotional literature for many programs often does not properly address important background knowledge required for success. For example, the popular subject of data science generally requires facility in existing statistical methods and programming tools. It is important to ensure that you have the foundational skills needed for the program.
4. **Do I have the opportunity to practice what I am learning and to receive feedback?** Learning transfer is best supported when the program has many hands-on projects and practicums that provide the opportunity to apply new learning. For instance, Dr. Kelly encourages online learners to consider Open Opportunities (<https://openopps.usajobs.gov>), a Governmentwide program that offers project-based professional development opportunities to current Federal employees and internships to students.
5. **Will my employer pay for the program? If not, am I prepared to?** Dr. Kelly points out that employees should not presume that their agency can or will pay for training. Organizational budget constraints can limit training approval and potentially make disapproval an expedient default.
6. **If I am paying for the program, are there additional funding sources or discounts available?** Dr. Kelly recommends that prospective students consult the Federal Academic Alliance (<https://www.opm.gov/wiki/training/Federal-Governmentwide-Academic-Alliances.ashx>), an OPM partnership that offers Federal employees discounted tuition rates and/or scholarships.
7. **If I intend to complete the training on Government time, do I have approval from my supervisor?** According to Dr. Kelly, online learners who wish to pursue a program of education or training should be prepared to show how

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such a program supports the agency or organizational mission and obtain approval before devoting work time to the activity.

- 8. Does the instructional format meet my needs?** Education can come in many instructional formats, such as online, face-to-face, or a blended approach that uses a mix of both. The literature suggests that instruction combining online and face-to-face elements offer students an advantage over purely face-to-face or online instruction.¹ Dr. Kelly agreed, advising that hybrid programs often work better than online learning alone because of the increased social context. Also, online instruction is best for learners who are self-disciplined, motivated, and well organized.

Your answers to the questions above will help determine if the program is worth the effort, time, and cost you will need to put into it. If you decide to proceed, then the next question is how legitimate the program is that you are considering. The legitimacy of educational programs is all about accreditation—a formal process for establishing a program’s credibility by an external organization to ensure that the program meets specific standards of quality. To assess the accreditation of the program you are considering, we suggest the following steps:

- Go to the school website and search for and verify the accreditation. Note that both the school and the specific programs of education may have separate accreditations and having one does not guarantee the other.
- Make sure that whatever accrediting agency the school claims awarded their accreditation is listed with the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Institutional Accrediting Agencies or the Council of Higher Education Accreditation which lists reputable accrediting agencies. The accreditation may be granted at the regional or national level, so look for the school’s online accreditation information for both, including complaint history, if any.
- Be familiar with the types of “programmatic” accreditations required to practice. Many education programs, especially those requiring licensure, are also accredited by various boards and organizations. For example, many organizations require that clinical and counseling psychology training programs be approved by the American Psychological Association in order for graduates to practice.
- Prospective students should also research online and ask practitioners and faculty in the field about the quality of particular programs and the types of programmatic accreditation needed.

In addition, Dr. Kelly advises employees embarking on an education program that they should contact their chief learning or organizational training officer. They will be knowledgeable about other valuable resources. Employees should carefully evaluate such programs and know where to look for virtual but legitimate opportunities to further their education and improve their skill sets. ❖

¹ See for instance, *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies* (2010), U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC.



The 2021 Merit Principles Survey Is Here!

Nearly 120,000 randomly selected Federal employees are receiving an email message inviting them to participate in MSPB’s 2021 Merit Principles Survey (MPS 2021). You may be one of these employees!

Watch for an email invitation from MSPB that contains a direct link to the MPS 2021. The Governmentwide survey will take around 30 minutes to complete and assesses how well agencies are managing their employees, avoiding prohibited personnel practices, and addressing sexual harassment, as well as a few questions about the effects of the pandemic. Participants may complete the survey during work hours, and responses are confidential.

MSPB thanks participants in advance for taking the time to provide your views of the Federal civil service during these interesting times. Aggregate data from this survey will be used to support several studies, the results of which will be shared with the President, Congress, the media, agency leaders, and other stakeholders. Additionally, look for discussions of survey results in future *Issues of Merit* newsletters. For questions about the MPS 2021, go to our website (<https://www.mspb.gov/studies/surveys.htm>).



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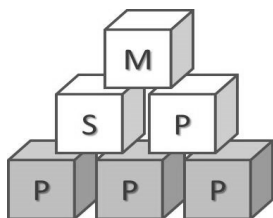
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